Introduction

- Pragmatics is an important aspect of communication competence. Yet this area is less often studied in African American (AA) children compared to their grammar and vocabulary.
- The present study focused on one aspect of pragmatic competence, namely the ability to elicit and respond to requests for conversational repair.
- Conversational repairs refer to the ways that speakers use language to clarify previous utterances. Previous studies (e.g., Gallagher, 1980) have shown that normal children respond to requests for repair (contingent queries) as young as 23 months.
- However, no published study appears to have focused on the repairs used by either the typically or atypically developing AA child speakers. If children's repair strategies normally can vary, as has been shown, then those in different cultures might use different strategies even when they are all able to repair utterances.

Research Questions

1. Do AA children's use of language show their awareness of conversational repairs in any form?
2. Do AA children repair their own utterances upon request, and do they ask others for utterance repair?
3. What types of repair strategies do AA children commonly use?
4. Are there differences between the conversational repairs used by AA children in different linguistic communities?

Method

Participants

- 79 normally developing three-year-old AA Head Start students in Lansing, MI (n=41) and Baton Rouge, LA (n=38).

Language Sample

- Archived, spontaneous speech samples lasting 30-40 minutes, elicited during adult-child play interactions using a common set of stimuli in three pre-designated activities across children:
  1. Car activity: child and examiner engaged in simple actions with toy cars
  2. Book activity: child described pictures from two books
  3. Doll activity: child and examiner engaged in pretend play with a doll family

Definition of Categories

Responses to repair requests:

1. Simple repetition: The child responded to the adult's request for repair by repeating the identical words used in the original utterance.
2. Modified repetition: The child changed the grammar but not semantic meaning of the utterance.
3. Revision: The child elaborated a previous utterance by adding new words or sentences that changed the semantic meaning.

Repair Elicitation:

1. Child-initiated repair request: The child asked the examiner to clarify something he or she said.
2. Self-initiated repair: The child repeated himself or herself in order to clarify a point without being prompted.

Criteria for Meeting Categories

To meet the criteria for each category, the child had 4 or more different utterances from the speech sample that fit in that category.

Results

1. Do AA children's use of language show their awareness of conversational repairs in any form?
   100% of children in both regions (n=41 for MI, n=38 for LA) demonstrated at least 4 instances of some form of repair.
2. Do repair categories include repair elicitations and responses to repair requests?
   90-93% of the MI cohort met repair elicitation and response to repair request criteria.
50% and 84% of the LA cohort met criteria for repair elicitation and response to repair request, respectively.
All 79 children had at least one response to repair requests and at least one repair elicitation, with the exception of 2 children per category in the LA cohort.

(3) What specific repair strategies do the children use?
• Simple repetition was the most common type of repair answer in both regions, followed by revision and modified repetition.
• For repair elicitation, repair repetition was far more common than repair request in both regions.

(4) Are there regional/community differences?
The MI cohort had more of both types of repair elicitation than LA. Although both groups used all three categories of responses to repair requests, the LA cohort used the modified repetition strategy less frequently than the MI cohort.

Conclusions
• All typically developing African American children demonstrated some type of conversational repair and, thus, an understanding of the repair function, as expected.
• Most AA children both respond to repair requests and elicit repairs as early as 3;0 years of age. Therefore, AA children develop in the same way as other children.
• AA children used the same three types of repair strategies as described in previous research for typically developing Standard English speakers. But regional differences existed between the two samples in the relative frequencies of use.

Discussion
• There are various possible reasons for the observed regional differences in this study:
  o In the southern culture, children may not be encouraged to make direct requests of adults.
  o The sample sizes for Louisiana were significantly shorter so they had fewer opportunities to demonstrate their use of repair.
  o Children within and across regions had different examiners who may have differed in their interaction styles.

Clinical Implications
• Such normative data can be used in the pragmatic language assessment of AA children, regardless of region.
• The repair strategies identified can help clinicians to better assess pragmatic skills in order to create attainable therapy goals when working with children who have poor language skills.

References